

DRAFT

**NEVADA REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
REGISTRATION FORM**

1. NAME OF PROPERTY

Historic name Morelli House

Other names N/A

2. LOCATION

Street and Number 814 Bridger Avenue

City or Town Las Vegas County Clark Zip 89101

Assessor's Parcel Number 139-34-712-016 Original Location? Yes X No. If no, date moved _____

3. CLASSIFICATION

Ownership of Property

X private
____ public-local
____ public-state

Category of Property

X building(s)
____ district
____ site
____ structure
____ object

Number of Resources within Property

<u>contributing</u>	<u>non-contributing</u>	
<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>	buildings
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	sites
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	structure
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	object
<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>	total

4. CERTIFICATION

a. BOARD OF MUSEUMS AND HISTORY

As the chair of the Nevada Museum and Library Board, I hereby certify that this nomination meets the documentation standards for listing in the Nevada Register of Historic Places.

Signature of the Chair

Date

B. STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICE

As the Nevada State Historic Preservation Officer, I hereby certify that this nomination meets the documentation standards for listing in the Nevada Register of Historic Places.

Signature of the State Historic Preservation Officer

Date

Property Name: Morelli House

5. FUNCTION OR USE

Historic Function

DOMESTIC/Single Dwelling

Current Function

Work in Progress

6. ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA (select one or more from instructions)

Criterion A _____ Criterion B _____ Criterion C X Criterion D _____

7. DESCRIPTION (select information that best describes exterior fabric, structural system, and roofing material)

Architectural Style (if applicable)

Modern

Materials

foundation Concrete perimeter
walls Stucco, wood, concrete block
roof Tropicool (crushed rock)
other _____

On the continuation sheet, provide a narrative description of the property's present and historical physical appearance (include significant exterior and interior features). See attached.

8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Areas of Significance

Architecture

Period of Significance (dates)

1959

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Significant Person

N/A

Architect/Builder

Hugh E. Taylor/Antonio Morelli/Richard Small

On the continuation sheet, state the property's historical significance and justification for listing. See attached.

Property Name: Morelli House

9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES (include all sources of information)

See attached.

10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

Acreage of Property 0.16 acre

Verbal Boundary Description

The Morelli House is being moved from its original location in the Desert Inn Estates (APN 162-16-610-012 to APN 139-34-712-016, Pioneer Heights Addition, Plat Book 1, Page 35, Block 5, Lots 31 and 32, commonly known as 814 Bridger Street, Las Vegas.

Boundary Justification

Resource boundaries include all land commonly associated with town lot identified as Clark County, Pioneer Heights Addition APN 139-34-712-016.

11. FORM PREPARED BY

Name/Title Mella Rothwell Harmon/Historic Preservation Specialist

Organization State Historic Preservation Office

Address 100 N. Stewart Street

City or Town Carson City State NV Zip 89701

Telephone Number 775-684-3447 Date July 15, 2001

12. ADDITIONAL REQUIREMENTS

Include the following items with your submission:

☒ **Photographs/Sketch** (provide one or more black-and-white photograph or sketch of the front elevation of the building, minimum size to be 5 inches by 7 inches. Multiple photographs showing additional angles and views would be preferable. Include the name of the photographer, date and direction the camera was facing).

☒ **Plan** (provide a line drawing of the floor plan of the building, if possible).

☒ **Map** (provide a USGS 7.5-minute quadrangle or current city street map with the property marked on it in pencil).

☒ **Continuation Sheets** (include continuation sheets, as needed, indicating appropriate section numbers).

13. PROPERTY OWNER

Name Junior League of Las Vegas

Address 461 S. Decatur Boulevard Telephone

City or Town Las Vegas State NV Zip Code 89107

CONTINUATION SHEET**Section 7: Description**

The Morelli House was built in 1959 at 52 Country Club Drive in prestigious Desert Inn Estates, which overlooked the world-class Desert Inn Golf Course. In fall 2001, the Morelli House will be moved to a parcel at Ninth Street and Bridger Avenue to save it from demolition, a fate that will befall all the homes in the Estates. Left behind in the move will be the lavish swimming pool in the front yard,¹ and Antonio Morelli's concrete-block music room, attached to the house a few years after its construction. At its new location, the home will be owned and operated by the Junior League of Las Vegas as offices, a history museum, and gallery.

The Morelli House was ultra-modern for its day, and in a sense defies architectural classification. In some regards, it fits McAlester and McAlester's "Contemporary." The flat-roofed subtype of Contemporary is a derivative of the earlier International style, and sometimes referred to as American International (McAlester and McAlester 1990, 482). It also meets the design intent of Populuxe, which according to author Thomas Hine, would include such qualities as "fun, fashionable, fantastic, and futuristic (1987, 38). According to National Register Bulletin 16A, modern movement styles might be classified as International Style, Miesian, New-formalism, Brutalism, Neo-expressionism, or Ranch style. None of these quite fit the bill, however. We know from individuals who worked on the construction of the house that Mr. and Mrs. Morelli were directly influenced by the works of R. M. Schindler, who built modernist houses in southern California, and Philip Johnson, whose acclaimed Glass House is located in New Canaan, Connecticut, Mrs. Morelli's home town. Drawing on all of the influences at play during the first half of the twentieth century, the best term to describe the Morelli House is simply "modern." Not that "modern" is all that simple, drawing as it does on diverse and often drastic responses, both American and European, to a new age.

Basically rectangular in plan, the overall appearance of the Morelli House is long and low, melding into the landscape. The flat roof is covered with crushed white rock. The widely-overhanging eaves are supported by exposed redwood beams. The natural stain is striking against the pale gray of the walls. The wall surface is stucco, and painted redwood with vertical battens, which counteract the extreme horizontality to a degree. In several places along the front of the building, walls are screened with decorative open-work cement blocks. These screens are topped by a row of windows. Between the top of the screen and the widely overhanging eaves, an area called a gallery by the architect.

The wall of the rear façade, which overlooked the second fairway, consists of the vertical wood on the outside of the kitchen, and a small ell containing the master bedroom that extends a few feet past the rear wall. In between the bedroom and kitchen is a bank of floor-to-ceiling windows (one segment is

¹ All other swimming pools in the Estates were in backyards, where they were in full view of golfers. Mr. Morelli cleverly placed his swimming pool in the front yard, where it was hidden from the street by a cement-block wall and tropical plantings.

CONTINUATION SHEET**Section 7: Description, continued**

a sliding glass door) that serve as the living room wall. A concrete patio extends the full length of the rear elevation, and is covered partly by the broad eaves. Four futuristic metal light fixtures hang from the beams, with smaller matching sconces attached to the metal framework of the windows. All of the windows and doors are set into aluminum frames. With the exception of the redwood double entry doors, all doors are full glass panels or sliding glass doors. Windows are either fixed or sliders. A carport extends from the southeast corner of the building. Originally, the carport was separated from the house by a breeze-way that led into the service yard on the east end. A few years after the Morelli's moved into the house, a portion of the breeze-way was enclosed to serve as Mr. Morelli's music studio. It was here that Mr. Morelli worked on compositions with the likes of Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, and Sammy Davis, Jr. Unfortunately, this portion of the house will not be moved.

The architectural plans identify the tar-and-gravel roof as "Tropicool with 2" gravel surface." The crushed rock is white and glitters in the sunlight. The roof compliments the modern styling of the house, and provides reduced surface temperature. It is assumed that Tropicool is a trade name, although conclusive evidence of this has not been found.

The home's interior is a paragon of modern appointments, all of which have been kept in original condition, down to the instruction books for the kitchen appliances. The roughly 3,300 square-foot house is laid out in an open plan, with two bedrooms, a living/dining area, and a kitchen/family room. The studio room was added a few years after the house was completed. Mr. Morelli's music studio was originally located off the kitchen, but Mrs. Morelli quickly decided that this arrangement would not suit her needs.

The kitchen is the height of modernity, with nearly every conceivable built-in appliance. The plans for the kitchen appointments detail the redwood cabinets, the built-in lazy Susan, spice cabinet, and tea cart, and the breakfast bar with a Formica top. The oven is a double copper-tone wall unit and the counter-top range has a large stainless steel hood above it. The light fixtures in the kitchen are a drop-style with opaque egg-shaped, white-glass globes.

The double entry doors, which are surrounded by colored art-glass panels in a rain-drop design, lead into an open foyer, separated from the dining/living room by a redwood panel that houses a coat closet and a storage closet. On the opposite side of the closets is a built-in redwood china cabinet, that delineates the dining area, which is an extension of the living room. The most prominent feature in the living room is the fireplace that consists of a raised "floating" marble-topped hearth with a massive hammered copper hood, extending to the ceiling. The north wall of the living room is floor-to-ceiling glass panels, a section of which is a sliding-glass door. The wall looks on to the patio and the golf course beyond. The Morelli's considered this golf-course-facing elevation to be the home's primary façade. The floor-to-ceiling draperies are operated electrically—flip a switch and they close, flip it again and they open.

CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 7: Description, continued

Beyond the living/dining area are the two bedrooms, identified in the plans as the master bedroom and the guest room. The master bedroom has separate walk-in wardrobes on either side of the custom-appointed bath. The master bath was designed to accommodate Mr. Morelli's tall frame, with a sunken custom-tiled-shower and a raised sink (for teeth brushing). The spacious guest room is located opposite the master bedroom, and has an elegantly-appointed connecting bath with custom tile.

Despite the fact that the house will be moved to a site at Ninth and Bridger, and be removed from its original setting, the Morelli House retains a high degree of integrity of design, materials, workmanship, and even association. It is an excellent early example of modern architecture in Las Vegas, and is important to the architectural history of the area.

CONTINUATION SHEET**Section 8. Significance**

The Morelli House is eligible for listing in the State Register of Historic Places under criterion C, for its modernistic style of architecture. The Morelli House was built in 1959 in prestigious Desert Inn Estates overlooking the second fairway at the world-class Desert Inn Golf Course. The Desert Inn was the fifth property to be built along the Las Vegas Strip, and its premier resort for more than a decade. Although it was the first country club community built in Las Vegas, it was not originally set up as a housing development. The first homes on the resort grounds were for the use of the owner/developer, Wilbur Clark, his executives, and certain high rollers, including Howard Hughes. Desert Inn Estates was developed in 1952, two years after the opening of the Desert Inn casino/resort. The ± 65 parcels encircled the golf course to the east of the hotel, with open desert land beyond. A few years later 15 interior parcels were opened for development under the name of Desert Inn Estates 2. The average parcel size was $\pm .25$ acre, but interspersed were a few double lots. Desert Inn Estates was the first Las Vegas development with employ modern design. A number of notable performers built homes in the Estates including Keely Smith, and Betty Grable and her husband, bandleader Harry James. Bob Miller, Nevada's governor from 1989 to 1999, grew up in Desert Inn Estates.

The Morelli House was built in 1959 by Antonio Morelli, who was the orchestra conductor and music director for the Sands Hotel. Mr. Morelli chose the modernistic design for his house in Desert Inn Estates and approached the Sands' carpenter foreman, Richard Small, with his ideas. Together, over the course of two years, the two men designed and built the house at 52 Country Club Drive, and Las Vegas architect, Hugh E. Taylor was engaged to draw the plans. Richard Small was the master carpenter at the Sands, but he also built several other custom homes in town. Mr. Small had first come from his home state of Montana to Nevada during the depression to work in the silver mines at Silver Peak. After a few years, he returned home but he returned to Las Vegas during World War II, and later worked as the carpenter foreman at the Nevada Test Site, where he built structures used in the atomic test shots.

Antonio Morelli was a significant character in the history of Las Vegas. Richard Small's son Michael reports that the mob that ran Las Vegas gambling interests brought Maestro Morelli to town to upgrade the level of local culture. A classically-trained musician, he brought classical music to the area, organizing the first pops concerts in the early 1960s. To promote music education, Mr. Morelli initiated the Antonio Morelli Friends of Music scholarship to assist University of Nevada, Las Vegas music students, with a \$5,000 gift in 1969. Also, in his role as music director for the Sands, he came into contact with America's top performers of the day. The Sands ruled the Strip at that time. The famous Rat Pack performed there, and it has been reported that singers like Dean Martin, Frank Sinatra, Sammy Davis, Jr., and others worked through scores in Morelli's music room (Michael Small, personal communication, May 9, 2001).

Mr. Kay Glenn purchased the home from Antonio Morelli's widow in 1978. Kay Glenn had been Howard Hughes' press secretary from 1951 until the millionaire's death in 1976. Mr. Glenn made only two changes to the house in the 22 years he owned it, and that was to change paint color in two places. In April 2000, Steve Wynn purchased the Desert Inn with plans to replace it with a 59-story mega-

CONTINUATION SHEET**Section 8. Significance, continued**

resort. These plans require not only the demolition of the historic Desert Inn Hotel, but also the golf course, and the surrounding homes in Desert Inn Estates.

It was at this point that fate intervened. In August 2000, the Las Vegas Junior League was completing plans to move the historic Whitehead House to its parcel on Ninth and Bridger. The League had spent several years gathering funds to move and restore the house for use as League offices, history museum, and art gallery, when in July 2000, the house burned to the ground. In the words of League president, Louise Helton, "When God closes a door, He opens a window." The window in this case was the offer to donate the Morelli House and have it moved to the League's parcel in the face of its impending demolition. Architecturally speaking, the Morelli House and the Whitehead House represent vastly different influences. Whereas, the Mission-Revival-style Whitehead House drew on a romantic notion of the West's Hispanic heritage, the Morelli House eschewed traditional and historical forms in favor of contemporary ideals. The Morelli House followed the modernist paradigm throughout.

Michael Small, now a lawyer in Las Vegas, was a teenager when the Morelli House was being built. He and his older brother Richard helped their father with the construction. Michael recalls many details of the construction, as well as conversations with Mr. Morelli about his vision for his home. According to Mr. Small, the Morellis were directly influenced by Rudolf Schindler's "window wall" houses in Palm Springs, and Philip Johnson's "Glass House" in New Canaan, Connecticut, Mrs. Morelli's home town (Michael Small, personal communication May 9, 2001). For them, the Las Vegas house was to be a retirement home, comfortable and casual. Natural wood was important to Mr. Morelli, as it was to Schindler. Mr. Small recalls redoing the redwood ceiling three times before it satisfied Mr. Morelli.

The modern style of the Morelli House was revolutionary for Las Vegas. Other custom homes of the time were merely expanded ranch-style forms. The Morelli house brought vaulted ceilings to the desert and the concept of integrating the building with the site, particularly effective in a golf course development. In a May 2, 2001 telephone conversation, UNLV professor of architecture, Janet White, interpreted the site plan of the Morelli house and its relationship to its setting. The window-wall façade, facing the golf course, was the front of the home—its monumental façade. The site was of the utmost importance to the structure, as were its proportions. The original plans show a different front arrangement, with a 6-foot-high block wall set in zig-zags, creating a dynamic approach. The pool was built behind the wall, sheltered from the street. A number of Morelli's neighbors built swimming pools on the golf course side of their homes, providing no privacy for swimmers, and interfering with the buildings' interplay with the golf course. Mr. Morelli understood the relationship between building and grounds, and sought to emphasize it. Mr. Morelli loved clean lines and eschewed ornamental plantings on his property. The only plantings were in the niches of the wall along the street.

CONTINUATION SHEET**Section 8. Significance, continued**

That Schindler would serve to be the inspiration for the Morelli house is appropriate, since Schindler developed his distinctive architectural stylings in the 1920s in the warm, sunny climate of southern California, an area that has strongly influenced Las Vegas architecture over the years. Schindler studied architecture and engineering in his native Austria. Inspired by Adolf Loos, Schindler came to the United States in 1914. Disappointed at first with America, Schindler was planning to return to Austria when he landed a position at Frank Lloyd Wright's Taliesin studio. In 1920, Wright sent Schindler to Los Angeles to oversee the construction of the Barnsdall House, popularly known as the Hollyhock House. Upon completion of the Hollyhock House, Schindler stayed in California and opened his own practice. By 1928, Schindler had developed a particular vision of architecture that is clearly reflected in Mr. Morelli's plans for his own home, "The sense for the perception of architecture is not the eyes—but living. Our life is its image" (McCoy 1960:149-150).

Philip Johnson was an early proponent of the International Style and worked with the early modernist masters from Europe, the likes of Mies van der Rohe, Walter Gropius, Le Corbusier, and J.J.P. Oud, and those from America, including Schindler, and his colleague and fellow Austrian, Richard Neutra. Beginning in 1946, Johnson undertook the building of his own home in New Canaan, Connecticut that would interpret "the worship of glass we inherited from [German pioneers] Scheerbart and Taut" (Webb 1994:36). Johnson's ideals are also reflected in the Morelli House: "I was building an American house. I like to get outdoors quickly, so I raised it [only] two steps above the ground . . ." (Webb 1994:36).

Philip Johnson went on to other design realms, like postmodernism, but Schindler, who died in 1953, practiced his art in the temperate regions of southern California, as well as the desert environment of Palm Springs, with a climate similar to Las Vegas. Even his early houses, sported flat roofs with wide overhangs, and window walls to bring the outdoors in and meld the building with the site. One of Schindler's design principles was that nothing be tied down, "Once an architect begins to worry about tying things down and about correct spacings, he arrives only at formal harmonies, and these have little to do with living" (McCoy 1960:174-175). The Morelli house displays this sense of not being tied down, and Mr. Morelli's goal was to avoid formalism, for his home was a place for living, rather than for show.

The Morelli House drew on the legacies of two great architects, and helped to establish for Las Vegas a tradition of distinctive and adventurous architecture. Despite the fact that some integrity will be lost when the house is moved from its original location along the Desert Inn Golf Course, the Morelli House will remain a significant element of Las Vegas' architectural history.

CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 9. Major Bibliographical References

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1986 *Populuxe*. Alfred A. Knopf, New York.

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1996 *The International Style*. W.W. Norton, New York.

Land, Barbara

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Libby, Jeffrey

2000a 1959 Morelli House will be Moved from DI Golf Course to Downtown. *Las Vegas Sun*, September 8, 2000.

McAlester, Virginia, and Lee McAlester

1990 *A Field Guide to American Houses*. Alfred A. Knopf, New York.

McCoy, Esther

1960 *Five California Architects*. Reinhold Publishing Corporation, New York.

1962 *Modern California Houses: Case Study Houses, 1945-1962*. Reinhold Publishing Corporation,
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1989 *Blueprints for Modern Living: History and Legacy of the Case Study Houses*. The MIT Press, Cambridge.

Packer, Adrienne

2000a Upscale Community Battles Hotel. *Las Vegas Sun*, April 9, 2000

2000b Buyout Divides Neighborhood. *Las Vegas Sun*, June 30, 2000.

CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 9. Major Bibliographical References, continued

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1994 *A Constructed View: The Architectural Photography of Julius Shulman*. Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., New York.

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2000 Historic Desert Inn Closes its Doors after 50 Years. *Las Vegas Sun*, August 28, 2000.

Taylor, Hugh E.

1959 Architectural drawings for residence building for Mr. and Mrs. Antonio Morelli. Hugh E. Taylor Design and Development. On file at State Historic Preservation Office, Carson City.

Venturi, Robert, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour

1977 *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*. MIT Press, Cambridge.

Webb, Michael

1994 *Architects House Themselves: Breaking New Ground*. The Preservation Press, National Trust for Historic Preservation, Washington, D.C.

Interviews

Michael Small, telephone conversation, May 9, 2001.

Professor Janet White, telephone conversation, May 9, 2001.